

Send for the Priest



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By:

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Cover Art: Die letzte Ölung (The Last Rites) 1846 oil on wood painting by Austrian artist, Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793 – 1865). The original is currently in a private collection. This is a faithful photographic reproduction of an original two-dimensional work of art.*



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WHEN TO SEND FOR THE PRIEST

Whenever there is an invalid in the house, the priest should be told. His visit should never be looked upon as a danger signal. After all, he is a friend, not an undertaker; and visiting the sick, a great work of mercy, is an important part of his vocation. So, give him a chance when need arises in your home. Do remember that having illness in your house will not be broadcast. The priest is not all knowing and may not hear anything about your trouble for days, or even weeks, unless you tell him. In these days when a hospital or nursing home is the usual place ill people are whisked off to, you should notify the priest before the person is admitted if at all possible.* It is not so easy, either for priest or invalid, to get to business in a hospital ward. Moreover, a sickness that begins with God's Blessing will be borne more cheerfully, and a cheerful invalid recovers more rapidly than one who is harassed and sad. Priests are cheerful visitors and spread God's Peace and sickness often flings open the door for God's Grace.

THE FIRST OBJECTIVE

Unless your sick call is for one in immediate danger, the priest's first goal will be to contact the invalid. Very possibly, the visit may end in nothing more alarming than a cheery "God Bless you," and a promise to call again in a day or two. After the priest has made contact, he may wish to have a little talk with the relative in charge. Accompany him to the door of the house and tell him all he wants to know. His questions will not be prompted by idle curiosity. Quite often, too, he may be able to help in less immediately professional ways.

On the other hand, it must not be imagined that, even when the sick person has become unconscious, it is too late to call the priest. The goodness of God has provided for this misfortune. As long as life remains, the priest is able to reach out, as it were, even into the unconscious and the last chance of Salvation is not yet gone. There is nothing sadder than a Catholic dying without the help of the Sacraments that were instituted for his salvation and of which he has so much need in his last hours.

SEND IN GOOD TIME

Therefore, send for the priest, in good time, if possible, but if necessary, even in the middle of the night. Whenever you send for the priest, make sure you give him all information that might be of use. It is a good idea to write down any information that will be helpful to the priest. Tell him who is ill and at what address. Tell whether the sick person is a Catholic or only anxious to become a Catholic. State the nature of the

* When the patient is admitted to the hospital it is most important to tell the staff that the person is a Catholic and wishes to see and be visited by their priest (or a priest who attends the hospital if the person does not have a parish priest). The case of nursing homes is even more urgent. Unless you tell the priest yourself, the patient may die without any priest being notified.

illness, whether the patient is conscious or not, whether he or she is able to swallow or unable to do so without vomiting or choking. Mention also if any other priest has been called and, if so, whether he administered any Sacraments. All this information is very useful to the priest. Try to ensure that an adult Catholic delivers the message either by telephone or in person. In urgent cases, if the messenger can wait to accompany the priest, so much the better. It will certainly save time, which may be all-important.

BE READY FOR THE PRIEST

In every Catholic home, one expects to see some objects of piety. In a sickroom, at least a crucifix should be visible. During the liturgical year, those present at Mass usually receive a blessed candle. If several members of the household are present, each one receives a candle, so there may be several in the home. Holy Water, too, may be acquired at church for the trouble of taking it away. These, then, with a small table, a small white cloth or table napkin, a small glass or an egg-cup containing drinking water, and a tea-cup or saucer should be stored within reach for immediate use. Choose a convenient spot in the sickroom—not too close to the bed, but within range of the sick person's vision. When you know the priest is on his way, arrange the table as a small altar. Put the clean cloth on it and put the crucifix at the back in the center, either leaning against the wall or stuck into something that will hold it upright. The candles should be arranged with one on each side, in line with the crucifix.

THE PLACE FOR THE HOLY WATER

The holy water, in the teacup or saucer, is put near one candle, together with a fresh sprig of privet or other greens cut from the nearest hedge, to be used to sprinkle the holy water. The green sprig should be in the holy water to avoid mistakes. The small glass or egg-cup should contain fresh drinking water and be placed beside a third candle with a match or two nearby and handy. Leave plenty of space in the front-middle of the table for the use of the priest. Should you have no candlesticks, a couple of old meat-paste jars can be made to serve. Even if you have none of these things, do not worry. Simply include that information in your message when you notify the priest, and he will bring his own. However, a clean place must be available to place the Blessed Sacrament, and there must be something with clean water in it for the patient to drink after receiving Holy Communion. There must also be a chair by the head of the bed for the priest to sit on while hearing the sick person's confession.

TO BE KEPT READY

The following articles should be kept ready for the visit of the priest to administer any Sacrament:

1. Cloth table napkin or smooth towel to serve as an altar cloth.
2. Folded handkerchief to go under the communicant's chin.
3. Tea cup or saucer for holy water with a sprig of green to sprinkle the water.
4. Small glass for drinking water (e.g., a wine glass or egg cup).
5. Three candles with holders of some sort for two of them.
6. Some method to light the candles.
7. Crucifix to stand or to lean against the wall.
8. Small supply of holy water (NOT Lourdes water).
9. Small, sturdy table for an "altar."
10. Chair for the priest to sit on while hearing Confession.

HOLY COMMUNION

When anyone is housebound or bed-ridden for a considerable time, even though there is no danger of death, Holy Communion should be received as often as the priest thinks right. The procedure for Holy Communion in the house never varies. It is the same for Holy Viaticum as it is for weekly or monthly reception.

If the patient is a woman, she should have her head covered just as in church, as also must any other women or girls in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

WAITING FOR THE PRIEST

When the priest arrives, someone should be waiting near the entrance with a lighted candle. As soon as the Blessed Sacrament arrives, this candle is carried before the priest to lead him to the sickroom. Here, the table should already be prepared and the two standing candles should be burning. The priest will walk straight to the table and deposit his Sacred Burden in the center while saying certain Latin prayers and sprinkling the sick and others in the room with holy water. Then, all should go out of the sickroom, closing the door as they leave. The priest will then hear the invalid's confession. When this is over, he will open the door, as a sign that all who wish may enter. They should genuflect and take up their position, kneeling out of the walk way. One (or all) now repeats the Confiteor, preferably in Latin. The priest, turning towards the invalid, then gives the general absolution. The person appointed to help, now puts the folded handkerchief under the chin of the communicant. Taking the Host and showing It, the priest now says, the "Domine non sum dignus" three times. Then he gives communion to the sick person, returns to the table where he attends to the pyx (the silver or gold box in which he brought the Host), and hands the glass or cup containing drinking water to the person in

charge, who helps the patient to take a drink. (Any water that remains should be poured out onto the earth in the yard or into the fire, after the priest has gone.) The next step depends on the situation.

- a. If the priest still bears the Blessed Sacrament, after handing the water glass to the person in charge, he will turn round and make the sign of the cross with It over the people. In this case, he must then be conducted (in silence) to the front door by the candle-bearer with a lighted candle.
- b. If the priest is not taking Holy Communion to another location, after handing the water glass to the person in charge, he will turn round and give an ordinary spoken blessing, signing the cross as usual with his hand. Then, he may or may not say prayers beside the bed according to his own judgment.

ANOINTING THE SICK

This Sacrament, commonly called Extreme Unction has suffered from its name. This is not an essay on the study of language or any kindred subject, so it is enough to say that Extreme Unction has no special connection with being “in extremis.” Any seriously ill Catholic may be anointed. Extreme Unction is the last kind of anointing given by the Church. Babies are anointed on their back, their breast, and their head when they are baptized. At Confirmation, we are anointed on the forehead. In ordination of a priest, his hands are anointed. When a priest becomes a bishop, his head is anointed. Kings of old were called “the Lord’s Anointed.” There remains only one more form of anointing—called the Last Anointing or, in Latin form, “Extrema Unctio.”

WHAT THE CATECHISM SAYS

Our catechism tells us that Extreme Unction is “anointing of the sick with Holy Oil, accompanied by prayer.” It is true this Sacrament may not be administered unless there is danger of death., Yet, the secondary objective of Extreme Unction is to remove the danger of death if God so wills, and it frequently does so—one might almost say more frequently than not. It is the doctor’s best auxiliary aid. How is that so? Because it completes the spiritual work of the Sacrament of Penance, removes all vestiges of sin from the soul, and soothes trouble and anxiety away. The patient will be at peace, allowing medicine and treatment to have a far better chance to achieve their purpose. Therefore, the Sacrament should be called for, clamored for, and not put off until disease has reduced the patient to a condition from which nothing but a first-class miracle can deliver them. The Sacrament does not work miracles—it acts, as it were, naturally on the body, through its supernatural effect on the soul.

PREPARATION FOR ANOINTING

Therefore, when the priest in attendance considers the patient should be anointed, the table should be prepared as for Holy Communion—cloth, crucifix, candles, holy water, but no drinking water, unless the patient is to communicate. See that the feet of the sick person are uncovered and that the bedclothes can be turned up easily when the time comes. If Holy Communion is to be given, it will be given before the anointing and will be given precisely as described in the earlier section of this booklet. Immediately afterward Communion is given, the anointing will be administered. The priest will require assistance only at the anointing of the feet, unless the patient is comatose or unconscious. The bystanders will say the Confiteor when so directed, and will kneel and pray silently while the sick person is being anointed. The anointing takes place on both eyelids, both earlobes, both nostrils, compressed lips, palms of both hands, and insteps of both feet. At each pair of anointing, the prayer is that the Lord may forgive “whatever sins thou hast committed by”—sight, hearing, smelling, tasting and speaking, touching, and straying. When the ceremony is over, the priest will need to wash his hands (after wiping off the oil with cotton wool and a little bit of stale bread, which are burnt afterwards). Finally, take the priest to the door, without candles or ceremony.

AFTER THE ANOINTING

After a patient has been anointed, the priest will usually pay short visits for prayer at frequent intervals—if possible every day. It might help if you pre-arranged these visits for a time that would be convenient for both the priest and the invalid. It might also help the patient if the altar remains in place and the candles are lit whenever the priest visits.

THE LAST BLESSING

The Church has by no means finished with the patient when the Anointing of the Sick has been administered. Besides the frequent visits of the priest and a wealth of special prayers for the sick and dying, there is the final gift of the Pope’s Blessing and the Plenary Indulgence that later comes into operation at the very moment of death. The ceremony is exceedingly simple, yet the result is incalculable for eternity.

When this blessing is given by itself, all that is necessary is a crucifix and some holy water. The crucifix should be put into the hands of the dying person.

TO GAIN THE INDULGENCE

To obtain the benefits of this great gift, it is necessary that the patient call upon the Name of Jesus while the blessing is actually being given. The patient should say, “My Jesus, Mercy,” out loud (or, if that is no longer possible, at least in his or her heart). If there is

danger of delirium or of coma approaching before the priest arrives, the sick person should be urged to say this prayer at least in the heart, with the intention of gaining the indulgence when it is administered, for it appears that this is a necessary condition to gain the indulgence. It is also advisable that the patient should be helped to resign all things to the adorable Will of God and to accept sickness and even death from God's Hands saying, "Thy Will be done."

FOR THE BLESSING

When the blessing is given, the priest will say the usual introductory invocation of peace upon the house and will then ask someone present to say the "I confess." That is the end of the blessing. When the blessing has been given and the crucifix placed against the lips of the dying person, lead the priest to the door and open it for him. The lengthy, though beautiful prayers for the dying should not be said all at once, but one now and then, while it is most useful to say very slowly the same invocation repeatedly. "Jesus, Mercy" is one of the very best invocations. This standard invocation always seems more than welcome also. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, help me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you. Amen."

WHEN A PRIEST CANNOT BE THERE

It is conceivable that you may not be able to get a priest—even in a big city. People can be severely injured or die from sudden illnesses, accidents, or heart attacks. Babies, too, may sicken and die. It is good to know what to do before the evil day when one may suddenly be called upon to act.

First in importance is the question of baptism in danger of death. This seems simple, but it **MUST** be done properly or it may easily be in vain.

ALL DONE BY ONE PERSON

First, all must be done by one person. The water must be poured by the one who says the words. Second, the water must flow over the actual skin of the body (preferably the forehead). Third, the words must be said while the water is poured. If the water does not flow, the baptism is probably in vain. If the water does not touch the skin, whether because of hair, oil, grease, or for whatever reason, it is certainly in vain. The baptism is valid only when the water is poured on the head. The amount of water to be used need not worry us. An excellent plan is to dip two fingers in water and gently but firmly wash a small patch of the child's forehead free of oil. The water is then poured (for example, from a spoon) onto the cleaned and moistened patch. As the water begins to trickle, these words must also begin: "I baptize thee, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of

the Holy Ghost.” It does not matter if the trickle ceases before the words are finished so long as it accompanies the words for some little way. Trickle and words, employed by one person only, are the necessary parts of baptism and any clean water will serve. We must remember however that no lay person may baptize if a priest can be found in time. It would be a mortally sinful usurpation of a priestly function.

When a baptism takes place in the above circumstances, remember that the Parish Priest must be informed at once and, should the child survive, it must be taken to the church as soon as possible for the rest of the baptismal blessings, exorcisms, and anointings.

SUDDEN ILLNESS

If there is a sudden illness and getting a priest is impossible, what should one do? The patient cannot be left alone and there is nobody to send. Moreover, perhaps there is great pain and languor, and human nature suggests that the sick person be left to die in peace. Remember, Eternity may be at stake. Gently but firmly say to the invalid something like this: “You are very ill, you may be in very great danger. So, we will make a little act of sorrow for all your sins. The priest may not be in time. Kiss this crucifix. Now listen while I pray.” Invite the person to join you if they can. Begin by praying, “O my God, I am very sorry that I have so often sinned against Thee, because Thou art so good, and with Thy Help I will never sin again. My Jesus, Mercy. Mary, my Mother, pray for me. Saint Joseph, pray for me. My dear Guardian Angel, stay with me.”

Above all, “Jesus, Mercy.” This can be said at intervals of a minute or two and is, believe me, most helpful. Persevere with it, until you are quite certain that the sick person is beyond your reach. Hearing lasts long after the power to move or speak has gone forever.

AFTER DEATH

HOW THE ROSARY IS PLACED

In arranging a Catholic body, it is usual to interlace the fingers with the rosary and to arrange them at about waist level. It is practically impossible to join the hands palm to palm and the intertwined fingers method is satisfactory. It is usual, whenever possible, to have a crucifix and two candles in the room with the dead. A small vase of holy water and a feather, or sprig of green, may be provided to sprinkle the deceased when visitors come to pray. A handkerchief should be laid over the face of the departed and only removed if special request is made. (Some people are willing to pray and to sprinkle holy water, even if they cannot easily look upon the features of the deceased, therefore, this request should by no means give offence.) God has made some people sensitive and others less sensitive. Blessed be His Holy Name.

THE BODY BROUGHT TO THE CHURCH

Subject always to considerations of health and charity, every Catholic is entitled to have his body brought to the parish church for a funeral service. Arrangements for this should be made with the clergy who will know when the church will be available.

Therefore, as soon as possible inform the parish priest the date proposed for the funeral. In agreement with the undertaker, arrange with the priest to bring the body into the church. Offerings should now be made by those who can do so. In the case of the poor, the funeral service is entirely free. It is clear, however, that poverty cannot be pleaded in conjunction with elaborate external pomp. If this is indulged in, the customary Church Fees must be paid.

In Catholic funeral arrangements, a car should be provided to take the priest and his servers to the cemetery. This car generally goes immediately in front of the hearse.

It is desirable, though not necessary, to have the appointed Mass said in the presence of the body on the morning of the funeral. If this is not feasible, the Mass can be said earlier or later in the week.

In all these matters, it is simpler and easier to consult the local clergy than to go by a book, however simplified.

Do not expect the priest to deliver a homily or to accompany you home after the burial. He may do either or both, but it is often a very heavy burden.

AFTER THE FUNERAL

Remember the deceased after their funeral. They can no longer help themselves. Do not waste money on flowers or elaborate funerals, but rather multiply Masses for the Faithful Departed. Remember the bitter cry of the Patriarch Job, which the Church has placed in the mouths of the dead, saying, "Have pity on me, have pity on me, at least you my friends, for the Hand of the Lord hath touched me." Also, do not forget the promise of Our Lord Himself, which is also a warning: "With the same measure that you shall mete withal it shall be measured to you again." Let us prepare for our own approaching departure by constant remembrance of those who have gone before, and thus we shall lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

SICK CHILDREN

When a child under the age of seven is taken seriously ill, always notify the priest as soon as possible. The Church has provided blessings for sick children and they should be used.

One cannot help noticing that children, even of very tender years, on their sick bed often seem to have a sharper and clearer understanding than they have in perfect health. Of course, once a child has been considered able to receive First Holy Communion, that child must be treated as an adult in matters of religion.

Therefore, when in danger, that child must be anointed and fed with the Holy Viaticum. Should such a child die, the obsequies are just as for an adult and prayers and masses should be offered for the child's soul.

Should a baptized infant die or a child who has not been considered sufficiently mature to receive Holy Viaticum, the funeral will be the Ceremonial for Infants. Whenever possible, the Mass of the Holy Angels will be offered in the presence of the little body, in thanksgiving to God, for the child's glory and for consolation in the parents' loss.

Stillborn or unbaptized infants cannot receive Catholic burial at all. We are in ignorance of what their fate may be in the next world. We have the words of the Lover of Little Children Himself when He said, "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." Therefore, the general view of Christians is that the little ones will be happy and will enjoy a certain natural happiness; knowing, loving, and serving God in a purely natural way. Nevertheless, parents whose neglect may be responsible for their children not having realized their supernatural destiny will have a terrible judgment to face. Indeed, it is written concerning the mere giving of scandal to a child, a remediable evil, that it would be better for that man "that a millstone should be hanged about his neck and that he should be drowned in the depths of the sea." How much greater than scandal is it to deprive "these little ones" for all eternity of that for which they were sent into the world?

★★★★★★

EXTREME UNCTION

Etching by Marco Alvise Pitteri based on the original painting by Pietro Longh (1701 - 1785) from Longh's series, The Seven Sacraments (c.1755).

At the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice, Italy, but not currently on public view.

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